Native Prairie
STEWARDSHIP

A CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

FACT SHEET

A thing of the past

At first glance, the Saskatchewan prairie seems an area with little human history. No old castles. No stone roads and walls. No ruins of ancient and mysterious civilizations. And up until the arrival of Henry Kelsey and his journal from the early 1690s, no written records. On closer examination, however, native prairie may hold the key for us to more fully understand our past.

There is a problem, however: native prairie is vanishing. Native prairie was once the largest vegetation community in North America. Now, in the highly cultivated rural municipalities of Saskatchewan, all that remains of the native grasses and forbs are patches. Between 1976 and 1981, native prairie disappeared at a rate of 1,000 acres per day. The heavy clay soils in the lacustrine plain around Regina, which covers about 1.3 million acres, contains only 16 native prairie sites totalling 500 acres, a mere 0.04 per cent of the area. Perishing with it is a thin and frail connection to Saskatchewan human prehistory.

[...over]

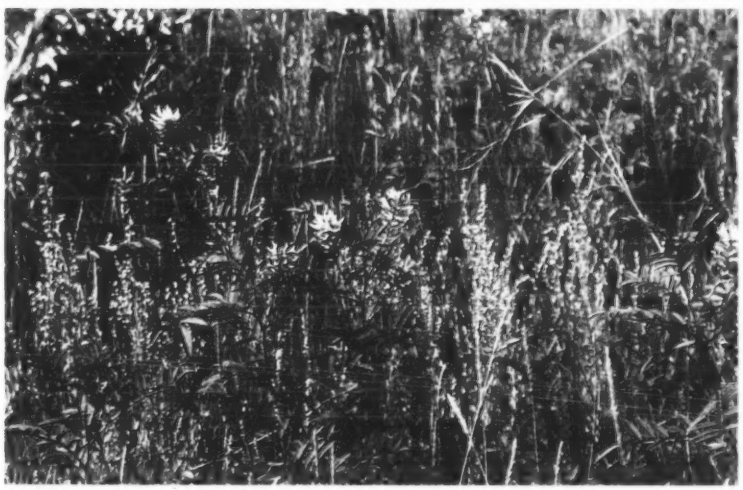
To halt this process, here is a challenge to consider: can you see the remnant native prairie on your land as a cultural landscape, a trigger to connect you to Saskatchewan's pre-contact history?

Some background

In Saskatchewan, we have historical triggers. For example, we have the powder house at Cumberland House (1886), the mess hall turned chapel at the RCMP Training Center in Regina (1883), Fort Carlton on the banks of the North Saskatchewan (1810), the Lieutenant-Governor's Residence, Battleford (1876). The challenge here is to extend historical significance from these kinds of historical objects to the native prairie itself.

Our human history in Saskatchewan may actually predate the native prairie. Archaeological evidence suggests that humans inhabited southern Saskatchewan soon after the last glacier began to retreat about 11,500 years ago. At that time, what now is prairie was black spruce forest. Studies have shown that northern plains groups were hunting large ice-age mammals like woolly mammoth and giant bison over 10,000 years ago. Dated sites indicate the presence of Pleistocene Big Game hunters in Saskatchewan by at least 10,000 years.

Native prairie replaced the black spruce forest, and for the last ten thousand years, has served as the oceanic scene in which generation after generation of Northern Plains Indians have passed their lives. These people, and their ancient ancestors, culled the herds of free roaming wild bison, the dominant species of the ecoregion. Covering an area of 162 million hectares that swept from Edmonton to the Mexican border, it was a massive landscape that swallowed up Plains Cree, Assiniboine, Blackfoot, Atsina, Hidatsa, Crow, among others. They disappeared into the landscape, less from objects obstructing them from view, as from the grass-covered distance shrinking them into specks, before vanishing round the curve of the earth.



The cutting edge

The Northern Plains Indians followed the rhythms of the seasons with the bison. They wintered in sheltered coulees and in the parklands, and summered on the open native prairie. During that time, their cultures evolved. Weapons changed from spears, to atlatl-darts, to bows and arrows. Hunting techniques changed, too, as they invented buffalo pounds and buffalo jumps for mass kills. Other major changes included the introduction of pottery about 2000 years ago, and the arrival of the horse.

These remain bloodless facts until you stand out in your native prairie when hail clouds spark and roar, and a wind carries the smell of rain, and you wonder what you might do were you not near a truck to drive to your home. What would it have been like to take shelter inside a tipi which to you still feels like outside? Where would you look for a rock suitable to fashion into an edge sharp enough to skin a 700 kilogram bull bison? How would you contend with the flies such a carcass would attract?

This is appreciating the native prairie as a cultural landscape, as an historical trigger. Were you standing near a cluster of tipi rings, or a medicine wheel, or a vision pit, or some other archaeological resource, your wonderings may arrive that much stronger.

A good place to look

Even without discovering any archaeological evidence on your native prairie, it is still a cultural landscape. Discovering an archaeological resource on it just makes its historical pull that much stronger.

Unlike a recreated main street of a frontier town, your native prairie hides undiscovered archaeological evidence. Although searching for it relies on both hardwon intuition and luck, here are a few ideas to keep in mind when you inspect your native prairie.

A good place to look for stone surface features, like tipi rings, boulder effigies, medicine wheels, and ancient pile of stones, is on hilltops, ones that offer a panoramic view of the surroundings, especially hilltops near water. Watch for unnatural patterning in the boulders and stones, linear curves and circles, and uniform spacing. Tipi rings are often found in clusters, sometimes fifty or more.

104-05385/

There are difficulties, of course. Over time, the stones may have become embedded in the earth; they are likely camouflaged by lichen; in some unfortunate cases, stones may be missing from a figure. And the native prairie obscures the ground. It's much easier to see stone features on native prairie cropped by cattle. Otherwise, try looking in the spring or in dry periods when the vegetation cover is sparser. An ideal time to examine a field is after any burn.

Commonly found artifacts are stone tools—projectile points, scrapers, hammerstones—and fragments of pottery. A good place to look for these items is in the vicinity of tipi rings, and along the edges of vehicle trails or cow trails, places where the land has been worn to expose buried artifacts.

Location, location, location

To archeology, the location in which an artifact has been found, is critical information. A large part of archaeological knowledge grows from correlating records of where various items have been found. When you make a find, record as exactly as possible the place where you found it. Then report it to Saskatchewan Heritage Branch. They keep records of all Saskatchewan archaeological finds. Your report may or may not lead to a visit by an archaeologist.

Saskatchewan Heritage Branch can also tell you whether there are any "known" archaeological resources on your land. A low pile of rocks you have noticed but thought caused by nature may have been identified as a cairn that marks a burial site. Not all cairns mark burial sites; nor do archaeologists disturb burial sites without reason and permission. There are a number of federal and provincial laws which regulate disturbance of burial places.

To excavate, the main tool of archaeologists, one must apply for a permit from the Saskatchewan Heritage Branch. These are issued to professional archaeologists only. A site with a large cluster of tipi rings may have been a popular spot for thousands of years. As an archaeologist removes layers of earth, they move back in time to earlier inhabitants, and different material cultures. A few inches of earth may be all that separates one material culture from another, although the material cultures may have been developed in different centuries. Some buffalo kill sites, like the one associated with Wanuskewin Heritage Park, had been used for 6,000 years. This is the place to visit an archaeological dig in progress.

The challenge

Can you look at the native prairie on your land as the historical scene for ten thousand years of human drama?

There are two basic ways to react to this challenge. It may appear as no challenge at all. Or it may appear as an odd challenge to make.

If you are one who sees it as no challenge at all, you likely experience native prairie as a trigger to historical thoughts already. You sense a pull from the native prairie that keeps you alert to traces of a human presence from the past. To you, even if particular events have gone unrecorded in writing, your native prairie is historically rich. And if we take membership in the Saskatchewan Archaeological Society as an indicator, hundreds of farmers have been caught by the lure of human history strong enough to make archeology an avocation.

If you are one who sees this challenge as an odd one to make, you likely have yet to open to the historical richness of the native prairie. You have within your grasp an opportunity to brighten and enliven your perception of your surroundings. You may need to invest some thought and imagination to create the trigger. But once it is in place, your enjoyment and appreciation of the native prairie on your land will grow. So will your chances of making archaeological discoveries.

Giving the past a future

Native prairie is an endangered space, a threatened ecosystem, the troubled habitat of prairie wildlife. Now you may also know it as a cultural landscape nearing extinction in the highly cultivated areas of Saskatchewan. Were it to hold historical significance to you, as it well might already, its future would become much more secure.

An archaeological find of some significance may be the added stimulus you need to preserve your native prairie for all time. With new easement agreements, you can ensure that when your land changes hands, the new owners will preserve the area as it is. In a very real way, you will be making history by what you do today, a legacy of respect that will never be forgotten.

For more information about native prairie, its plantlife, its wildlife, about techniques to restore its integrity, even to get our beautiful publication on prairie birds, call or write to us:

Saskatchewan Wetland Conservation Corporation
Room 101 - 2022 Cornwall Street
Regina, Saskatchewan S4P 2K5
Tel: (306) 787-0726
Fax: (306) 787-0780
website: http://wetland.sk.ca
e-mail: swccnet@wetland.sk.ca

Additional contacts:

Saskatchewan Heritage Branch
Municipal Government
1855 Victoria Avenue
Regina, Saskatchewan S4P 3V7
Tel: (306) 787-5772

Saskatchewan Archeological Society
#5 - 816 1st Avenue North
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7K 1Y3
Tel: (306) 664-4124

The Saskatchewan Wetland Conservation Corporation acknowledges the contributions of the following partners:- Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada through the Agriculture Institute of Management in Saskatchewan, Agricultural Environmental Stewardship Initiative, Canada-Saskatchewan Agricultural Green Plan Agreement, Canadian Adaptation and Rural Development in Saskatchewan, Canadian Agriculture Rural Communities Initiative - **Canada Millennium Partnership Program - Canadian Wildlife Service and World Wildlife Fund** (Endangered Species Recovery Fund) - **Ducks Unlimited Canada - Environment Canada** through EcoACTION - **Government of Canada** Habitat Stewardship Program for Species at Risk - **National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (U.S.) - Nature Conservancy of Canada - Saskatchewan Environment and Resource Management** through the Fish and Wildlife Development Fund - **SaskPower-Shand Greenhouse - TD - Canada Trust Friends of the Environment Foundation- Wildlife Habitat Canada - World Wildlife Fund**

Saskatchewan Wetland Conservation Corporation

Printed in Canada

ISBN # 1-896793-04-5 03/2002